

Cavafy, Constantine P.
BEFORE TIME COULD CHANGE THEM [pointer]
Trans. By Theoharis Constantine Theoharis
Harcourt (384 pp.)
\$28.00
April 2001
ISBN 0-15-100519-2

Cavafy, who died nearly seventy years ago, remains one of the foremost modern Greek poets. He was born in Alexandria in 1863 to a Greek mercantile family whose fortunes had already begun waning, forcing him, in classic fashion, to accept a clerk's position while he wrote poetry, coming into his own with the publication of his first collection at age forty-one. He composed an average of seventy verses per year, most of which he destroyed, printing the remaining few on broadsheets which he circulated among close friends and family. Translator Theoharis, the author of two books of literary criticism and a teacher of comparative literature at Harvard, has arranged the volume according to Cavafy's own suggestions for a thematic, rather than a chronological, ordering. The poet's predominantly iambic meter translates well into English, though his rhyming and assonance do not. Theoharis has kept the same number of lines that occurred in the original Greek, though he does not maintain every line or stanza break. He has uncovered a dozen poems not included in the previous "complete" version of Cavafy's work, which was published in 1961 with an introduction by W. H. Auden. Cavafy was regarded as anachronistic for the spiritual dimension of his poetry and immoral for his open tributes to homosexual love, yet he retained a following of champions, including Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Gore Vidal, who contributes the foreword. The poet's most compelling verses include dramatic soliloquies of historical figures and the sensual depictions of male-male romance, both emphasizing the possibility of "comporting [oneself] in the world beautifully and justly."

Informed by both pagan and Christian Hellenic traditions, at turns Platonic or Stoic, Cavafy combines lyric love poetry, history, mythology, and moral philosophy, while he illuminates the eternal conflict between *eros* and the constraints of civilization.